

Lean In

A Message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
December 18, 2022
by Rev. Dave Le Grand

The art piece you see on screen now is entitled "Dance of the Soul" by Hannah Garrity. You should have seen Maureen, Jen, Sue, and I, trying to make out what was depicted here! We knew it was somehow a dancer, but where? How? It harkens me back to my uncouth days backpacking in Europe.

I had the privilege of visiting the world's most storied art galleries: the Louvre in Paris, the Uffizi in Florence, the Prado in Madrid. I was mesmerized by the scale of the sculptures and paintings, the vividness, the goriness. Not an art aficionado at all at the age of 20, I stood back to take in the whole picture, but then I would lean in, to appreciate the details.

Leaning in to this piece of artwork is what we did last week. This is what the artist Hannah Garrity says about it:

Drawing inspiration from long exposure images of dancers, I overlaid three poses... The front footsteps forward while the figure leans back. The dancer leaps, one knee pulled up toward the chest, head and hands forward. The head almost touches the toes in a 'c' shape while the arms spin outstretched. The energy of Mary's soul creates a trinitarian flow as she rejoices in the hope, the healing, and the freedom from oppression that her son will provide as a precedent for generations to come.¹

Wow, three poses overlaid in one. Well, that explains it. I love this image, though, that demands that I lean in, and ponder.

Leaning into something... that seems a modern phrase often used to describe the act persisting as one faces something that is most uncomfortable. "Leaning into the pain," I recall doing when I broke my wrist. Of course, we are gentle with the injury at first. But then, in physiotherapy, we begin to work through the pain.

Leaning into discomfort is not always a strength of mine. Tasks that are tedious or difficult, I have it down to a fine art, procrastinating and avoiding. I think we all are inclined to avoid at times, rather than to *lean in*.

I have been doing a great deal of wondering about Mary lately. I experienced numerous idealized images of Mary during my whirlwind tour of European art galleries – almost always depicting a delicate, very white skinned, blue-eyed, girl looking so passive in the presence of the angel Gabriel. Years later, that image doesn't ring true, and an article I read last week spoke to my suspicions.

The article shed some light on what the Historical Mary would have been like. Lean into the facts, and we will discover that Mary would have been a Palestinian girl, young though. She would not at all have been the slight, fragile creature we see in the classic art pieces. Mary, a peasant woman:

¹¹ Hannah Garrity, "Dance of the Soul", Sanctified Art. <https://sanctifiedart.org/image-licensing-library-advent/dance-of-the-soul>

Like women in many parts of the world today, Mary most likely spent, on the average, 10 hours a day on domestic chores like carrying water from a nearby well or stream, gathering wood for the fire, cooking meals and washing utensils and clothes.²

Though her culture was quite different from that of our [modern reality] it was not unlike that of women in thousands of villages as they exist today in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Her daily life and labour were hard. With Joseph, she raised Jesus in oppressive circumstances, struggling to pay the taxes by which the rich became richer at the expense of the poor. As with the vast majority of people in world history, most of Mary's difficult life went unrecorded.³

What I notice about this story, as Luke's Gospel tells it, is that soon after Mary is stunned by the news of the angel, she makes a trip to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. I imagine that experience of solidarity with an older woman. Two women sharing in what must have seemed an unbelievable reality that they shared – transformative power within them. We need that sometimes – someone perhaps older and wiser, to lean in and listen to us when we face uncomfortable news. Sometimes we are the older, wiser ones, leaning in to listen.

That young girl, what little we know for certain about her, then echoes the words of Hannah of the Hebrew Scriptures.⁴ Words of revolution, of empires brought low, and weak lifted up. She sings what we now call the Magnificat, from the first chapter of Luke:

God has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly. The hungry God has filled with good things; the rich God has sent away empty.

Does this revolutionary tone of this comfort you? Unsettle you? That might be something for us to sit with, to lean into for awhile.

I'll leave you with the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor who courageously resisted Hitler's Nazis and was ultimately executed for it. He said of Mary's Magnificat, it is "...the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary hymn ever sung."⁵

God's revolution borne by Mary and Elizabeth. May it be borne in us in the coming week as well. Amen.

² Robert P. Maloney, "The Historical Mary". <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/555/article/historical-mary>

³ Ibid

⁴ Hannah, like Elizabeth, had passed childbearing age, yet she prayed vigilantly. She promised God that, if she was blessed with a child, she would commit the child to God's work in the Temple. Upon finding out she is pregnant, and bursts into song. See <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Samuel%202&version=NRSVUE> (1 Samuel chapter 2]

⁵ "My Spirit Rejoices," Advent Sermon, 1993. The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).